



Northern Ireland Audit Office

MEDIA RELEASE

Special Educational Needs

Mr Kieran Donnelly, the Comptroller and Auditor General, today published his report on Special Educational Needs. Children with special educational needs may require extra help to achieve their potential at school. This report focuses on how these children are provided for within mainstream schools.

Mr Donnelly said: ***“It is over ten years since the Department of Education began a review to address a range of issues including the increase in the number of children with special educational needs, and the inconsistencies and delays in assessment and provision”.***

“My report shows that the number of children with special educational needs and the associated costs are continuing to rise. In 2016-17, just over 76,300 children were reported as having special educational needs. That is 22 per cent of the school population and is higher than in England. In 2015-16 expenditure was over £250 million and of this £217 million was spent by the Education Authority”.

“Despite the widespread acceptance of the need for early intervention, inconsistencies in the identification of children with special educational needs persist and delay in the completion of formal statements remains a major issue”.

Mr Donnelly added that: ***“This continued rise in the numbers of children with special educational needs presents a challenge for the Department, the Education Authority and schools, in terms of increasing pressure on the education budget”.***

For the majority of children with special educational needs their needs are expected to be met within the school through reasonable adjustments and support. However, when the special educational needs of a child cannot be met in this way the Education Authority will carry out a statutory assessment of need.

Despite having a statutory time limit of 26 weeks to complete the assessment process, in 2015-16, 79 per cent of new statements were issued outside this timeframe. According to the Education Authority this is mainly due to valid exceptions permitted in legislation relating to delays in receiving advice from the health sector. The report acknowledges that work is ongoing to reduce waiting times, but the reasons for delays must be closely monitored if improvements are to be achieved.

Whilst the report recognises that the educational achievements of children with special educational needs are improving, more needs to be done to monitor and evaluate progress and assess the effectiveness of the support provided.

THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON 27 JUNE 2017

The provision of a classroom assistant (at a cost of £55 million in 2015-16) is often considered as a key form of support given to children with a statement of special educational needs yet their impact, or that of any other support provided, has not been evaluated at a strategic level. In the absence of any such evaluation, it is difficult to see how the Department or the Education Authority are ensuring they achieve the best outcomes for children with special educational needs.

Mr Donnelly concluded that: ***“Neither the Department nor the Education Authority can currently demonstrate value for money in terms of economy, efficiency or effectiveness, in the provision of support to children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. It is therefore crucial that the Department and the Education Authority assess the quality of support provided by formally evaluating it in terms of the progress made by children. This will allow resources to be focused on the types of support which maximise progress and improve outcomes”.***

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. This report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on 27 June 2017.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Colette Kane (028 9025 1064) or Suzanne Murphy (028 9025 1125).